

Leading collaborative projects, recognising distinctive voices and empowering others to create

Luke Millard
Graham Lowe

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education: studies in third space professionalism* on 31st March 2022, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9780367480011>

Leading Collaborative Projects, Recognising Distinctive Voices and Empowering Others to Create

Introduction

Perhaps there is something in the character of a Third Space Professional that makes them want to engage in collaborative activities. The writers of this chapter are part of a central educational development unit at a widening participation university and over the past 12 years have regularly been challenged to define, instigate, create and/or lead collaborative projects that deliver change initiatives impacting on the whole institution. This chapter will explore the theoretical models that provide the foundation for collaboration and leadership and provide case studies of how this approach has enabled successful collaboration and outcomes. We hope to reveal how the, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, acknowledgement of differing perspectives on the third space, might influence approaches to engaging as an effective Third Space Professional.

We do this based in the belief that those of us who operate in the third space should consider ourselves fortunate. We have the opportunity to work in ways that others cannot. It is our responsibility to maximize the potential of the situation and deliver solutions that have the most beneficial impact on the student and staff experience. The institutional silos that faculties, schools and departments can sometimes generate need people who can work across them and enable participants to see the bigger picture. This chapter seeks to show how this approach has been delivered at one university through the embracing of boundary spanning approaches (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011).

Context

Birmingham City University is located in Birmingham, England's second city and central hub to the traditional Midlands industrial base. The University serves the needs of the city and has a student population of over 24,000 students. The widening participation roots of the university are still strongly felt and mean that it recruits students from diverse backgrounds. Recruitment data in 2020 revealed a population that was made up of 65% commuters; 54% from a black or minority ethnic background and with over a third of students originating from areas of the highest socio and economic deprivation in the UK.

Within this context the University follows a path of providing professional courses that help develop the individual and meet the needs of the city and its communities. This sees the provision of a broad brush of courses that focus on healthcare and education, business, engineering and technology, and the arts. Through this varied and exciting landscape the Education Development Service (EDS) delivers academic staff development and student personal development functions.

At the heart of the EDS offer is collaboration. This may be viewed through the lens of academic staff development and the partnerships with colleagues and academic managers (Curran and Millard, 2015) or through the student lens as the student

engagement partnerships focus on individual student attainment and the wider improving of the student learning experience through alliances with the Students Union (Nygaard et al, 2013).

At a more strategic level, EDS has regularly been challenged to lead innovative projects that bring together stakeholders from across the university to develop a new service or idea. These include institutional activities around student engagement, simulation education, curriculum redesign, student employment on campus, student personal development and the creation of a digital assessment centre. Some of these experiences will be detailed further as the role of the participants and leaders is explored.

Theoretical rationale

The boundaries to people working together can be both physical and mental. From the pragmatic housing of departments into different buildings according to space requirements to the historical, sometimes traditional, attitudinal mistrust between different disciplines, there are many ways in which the organization of an HE institution may impact on peoples' ability to work collaboratively. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: xvi) suggest that '*the leadership advantage goes to the people who are most closely linked to others and can work with a great variety of people from differing positions, backgrounds and locations*'. The ability to have such an overview within large organisations is likely to fall to those who work outside of discipline specific structures and have a perceived sense of neutrality that does not specifically promote one view or another and is open to insight and change to deliver a collaborative outcome. This is boundary spanning leadership and can be used to bring people from disparate functions together to deliver ideas and outcomes that would be above and beyond what they might do in isolation.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: xxii) describe boundary spanning leadership as '*the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across group boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal*'. As an education development department with no direct ability to lead curriculum development or manage academic staff, the need for EDS to be persuasive and to provide solution focused models of practice has been paramount for many years. The harnessing of these abilities through the framework of boundary spanning approaches made the process clearer to those who engaged and provided some reassurance that there was a rationale behind their approach.

As leaders we should be expected to think and act beyond our natural or perceived boundaries. As third space professionals we should be seen as 'positive irritants' within our own organisations, always striving for improvement and never satisfied with the status quo and institutional drift. This requires the 'positive irritant' to be challenging in constructive ways, challenging goals and strategy, coordinating resources and delivering collective commitments and successes beyond the ability of any one individual. Whilst there can be a tension here, we strongly believe that behaving in this way is doing the right thing, even if it is not always seen by colleagues as doing things right. It requires an ongoing and iterative reflective

process to ensure that the key word in colleagues' minds is 'positive' rather than 'irritant'.

To deliver such outcomes requires collaborative planning and operations that establish and build cross departmental teams that feel empowered to create new vision and even challenge their own practices. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: 13) provide such a framework through the nexus effect that requires the leader to manage boundaries, forge common ground and discover new frontiers. As practitioners who have embraced this model and approach for over 5 years, we feel that the heart and engine of this approach is the generation of a sense of trust within the collaborative team. The model characterizes this as fostering respect and creating a sense of safety within the team. In practice this means that each member of the team has to be given the time for their voice to be heard and for them to feel that they are recognised as their own particular expert within the group. Through such recognition, the confident expert can forge common ground and scrutinize their own practice and that of the department and institution so that they can build community and share understandings within the collaborative team. Once the trust and perspectives are shared the model suggests that the unified team can now discover new frontiers and develop the ideas and challenge the practices that will lead to innovation and a successful outcome. Through engagement with case studies later in this chapter we will show how the model was employed to exceed expectations.

As third space professionals and boundary spanning leaders we are unlikely to be restricted to one way of working. At BCU the boundary spanning model is also supported and challenged by other ideas. The inherent messiness of collaborative working and the fact that new ideas and questions do not wait for an agenda item make rhizomatic learning a natural ally. Cormier (2010) speaks of this learning being community based and of being a social process in which we learn with and from each other. This resonates extremely well with the work of a 'positive irritant' who does not seek to provide the solution, but who engages with and encourages a community of motivated practitioners to identify the issues of concern and then generate the collaborative solutions. This often requires the team to listen to discordant views and voices before collective wisdom prevails and this process can be uncomfortable for those leading and participating, but it remains an important element as expertise is recognised and trust built.

The Integrated Professional

Academic staff within universities are used to wearing a variety of hats, for example, teacher, personal tutor, researcher or practitioner. However, these hats have tended to be grouped together within a narrow definition of 'academic' or 'faculty'. Whitchurch (2008, 2013) chose to offer the view that the sector was developing 'integrated professionals' who wear hats from both within and outside of their traditional domain. This model offered an insight into the dispositions of those that inhabit the third space and provided a useful shorthand for the ways in which they

work. It also shared a language with boundary spanning leadership and other similar approaches.

At BCU we have applied a framework (Table 1) adapted from this work to enable us to explore the roles of colleagues within the department at the centre of this chapter to add context to the case studies that follow.

Bounded Professional Disposition	Cross-Boundary Professional Disposition	Unbounded Professional Disposition	Blended Professional Disposition
See structural boundaries as a framework to work within. Have a specialist function or role (actual or perceived). Perform their role in ways that are prescribed. Are concerned for continuity and the safeguarding of standards and procedures.	See structural boundaries as opportunities to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity. Have and use knowledge of territories on either side of boundaries that they encounter. Have and use negotiating and political skills, to become actors in institutional decision-making.	Display a disregard for boundaries, focussing on and identifying with broadly based projects. Draw on external experience and contacts. Adopt a more open-ended and exploratory approach to their work, focussing on developmental activity.	Do not perceive that boundaries really exist, or have influence on their work. The role is designed to cross professional and academic domains. Whilst they may have academic credentials in the form of master's degrees and doctorates, They are as likely to have experience from outside Higher Education.

Adapted from Whitchurch (2008, 2013)

Table 1 - Dispositions related to typology of Third Space Professionals

Using the four 'types' as an analytical tool, we have been able to establish that the department at the centre of this case study consists of not just of all types, but of people who cross types, or see themselves behaving in different ways according to specific tasks and roles within the department. For example, Bounded Professionals – those 'who see themselves as working within clear structural boundaries', (Whitchurch, 2013, 8) - exist as those that have a specific role, such as leading on a PGCE course, organising learning & teaching development events or managing our fellowship application process. However, few people in the department have just one role. The manager of the fellowship application process also carries out curriculum design consultancy work with academic teams around the university. Whilst she behaves as a Bounded Professional when undertaking the fellowship management part of her job, she is more likely to behave as a Cross Boundary Professional – those who build, 'institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories on either side of the boundaries that they encounter', (Whitchurch, 2013, 8) when undertaking the curriculum development part of her job. In examining the roles and ways people work within our department we have established that some staff find it

easier to transfer between approaches and this is generally (but certainly not universally) related to experiences before joining the department.

It lies beyond the remit of this chapter, but the use of this typology as a lens through which to examine the dispositions and behaviours of our staff has begun to suggest that issues of staff development and performance might be addressed through examining the degree to which colleagues are able to understand and take on different roles according to context and need. This is something we expect to explore in later work.

The two authors of this chapter come from quite different backgrounds, and whilst they too exhibit characteristic of all four types at times, they generally fall into two categories. One of us comes from a non-academic background, having started out in administrative quality enhancement. He would generally fit the typology of 'Unbounded Professional' in that, whilst he accepts that boundaries exist, he shows a general disregard for them and takes a more solution focused approach with a focus on the end point and delivering projects with institutional impact. The other author comes from an academic background and would more generally fit the typology, 'Cross-Boundary Professional'. Rather than seeing boundaries as something to be disregarded, he has developed knowledge and contacts from across the domains and uses this to negotiate his way around boundaries.

These dispositions appear to have caused the evolution of the two subtly different approaches to working on cross-institution projects as described in the case studies below. We place no hierarchical value on each modality. Neither is this a case of 'Good Cop, Bad Cop'. We do, however, believe that the contribution and combination of both approaches has helped to deliver what success there has been in these and other projects.

In both approaches the fundamental aim is the same. Both authors have worked on the projects described below with the aim of creating an institutional development for the benefit of the students that requires the engagement and cooperation of colleagues from across different domains, most of whom would initially see themselves as Bounded Professionals.

Case study one: Graduate+

The challenge had been set by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) to develop an institutional extra-curricular awards programme for students that would improve student employment rates. The task was led by one of the authors with a challenging deadline for completion of 12 weeks. The education development team had often been charged with initiating, and delivery institutional change agendas (Nygaard 2013, Millard 2020) and the timeframe was viewed as achievable.

The first stage was the creation of an institutional development group. The four Executive Deans were asked to nominate two academics who would be interested in helping design an approach. Rather helpfully, this seemed to result in a provocateur and an enthusiast being identified. In addition, a number of professional staff from

central services: Library, Students' Union, Careers, IT were selected to provide an input that focused on delivery of the offer (Millard and Evans, 2020).

The initial focus was on key institutional drivers such as strategic policies and graduate attribute statements. The lead chose to bring these elements together and design a set of principles that the development group could edit and improve. This initial phase took three meetings of at least an hour each and was vital in its role of settling all participants within the team. It allowed their expertise to be recognised and for them to then feel empowered to offer new visions that may break their traditional silo approaches (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011).

BCU is professionally focused university and many of the degrees lead to a direct route into employment (nurse, teacher, artist, engineer). To some degree we might expect that fact to improve colleagues' understanding and openness to third space working as many of them inhabit both academic and professional spaces, and this is certainly our experience in many cases. However, there are also those colleagues for whom the academic and professional identities are bound up into a siloed mentality around their particular profession. That issue actually became one of the key drivers in this particular case study. The question became, "What if a student on a particular professional course (for example, undergraduate teacher training) decided they did not want that job? Were they still employable and how could this new offer help with that?" This key question became a mantra for the initiative as we moved forward.

The change lead called weekly meetings over the 12 week period, attendance varied, but consistency of approach and sharing of information meant all participants could remain connected. An accidental core to the project was that one flip chart pad was used and it was brought out for each meeting so principles and any areas of decision could always be reflected upon if the focus of the group wavered. Digital solutions were available, but the way in which paper and pen enabled the development group to engage and write their own thoughts also meant that their views were being recognised and valued.

The requirement to pull the group back to the principles was constant as the wide ranging brief meant that it was relatively easy for areas of personal interest (and, to some extent, siloed thinking) to deflect the group. The buy in of the group was key in this regard as members would often self-correct or challenge others to ensure progress was made. The provocateurs in the group could sometimes be seen as a negative as they would often start a meeting by saying that the issue identified could not be done. However, the dynamics within the group often saw that same provocateur arriving at the solution by the end of the meeting.

As a Third Space Professional, the key here was not be the dictator, but to allow members to air their views and ensure discussion within the group to persuade the provocateur of the possibilities. In some circumstances, as the project lead, this was concerning as it ceded control to the group to creatively solve the issue. However, because the group had already signed up to the principles for the development, any straying was likely to be limited or could be curtailed through deploying the principles.

Once the award had been designed the development group switched mode and the individuals went back to their faculties and became the chief advocates for the new initiative, co-presenting to their own faculties as the development was rolled out across the university. Graduate+ now supports personal skills development for over 12000 students a year and has been the first employability award to be endorsed by AdvanceHE (Millard et al, 2020).

Case study two: Digital Assessment Centre

The project lead was set the task of creating the UK's first full scale university digital assessment centre based on the American Testing Center model. The initial brief focused on a processing operation around summative and formative assessments. There was little to no evidence of such a centre existing within the UK higher education sector. However, there was plenty of evidence of such centres in the USA where the vast majority of colleges and universities run such programmes and there was even a national body to promote the work and share good practice, the National Collegiate Testing Association.

Initial research identified three universities who were viewed by the internal US market as being best in sector. They were contacted and one, Kennesaw State University, was visionary enough to see the potential benefits of working with an international partner. A visit to Kennesaw saw the dominant approach in the US is to see testing centers as independent, income generating service departments who processed student examinations. Very quickly we decided that the BCU vision should be wider than that in ambition and provide an opportunity to engage the whole student experience.

The change process was different to case study one in that two groups were created. One was similar to Graduate+ in that an academic development group was created to vision what was possible with the student experience. The second group was an implementation group made of professional services staff who had to design and equip a physical space with PCs, purchase assessment software, integrate with the student record system and create an attractive, reliable service with which academic colleagues and students would want to engage.

Both the authors of this chapter were involved in this development and this saw a more directive approach as the physical creation of a centre was clear and could be modelled through collaboration with our partners at Kennesaw State University. Therefore, the implementation group followed a project management protocol around key deliverables and intended outcomes which adhered to a strict timeframe. This makes it sound relatively easy, but this aspect took the majority of the project leads time as legal, contracts and procurement issues sought to derail progress.

In comparison the academic development group proved to be proactive and creative. A development model was swiftly agreed that sought to create opportunities for the assessment centre to be engaged in all aspects of the student journey under the headings of Student Discovery, Student Development and Student Destination.

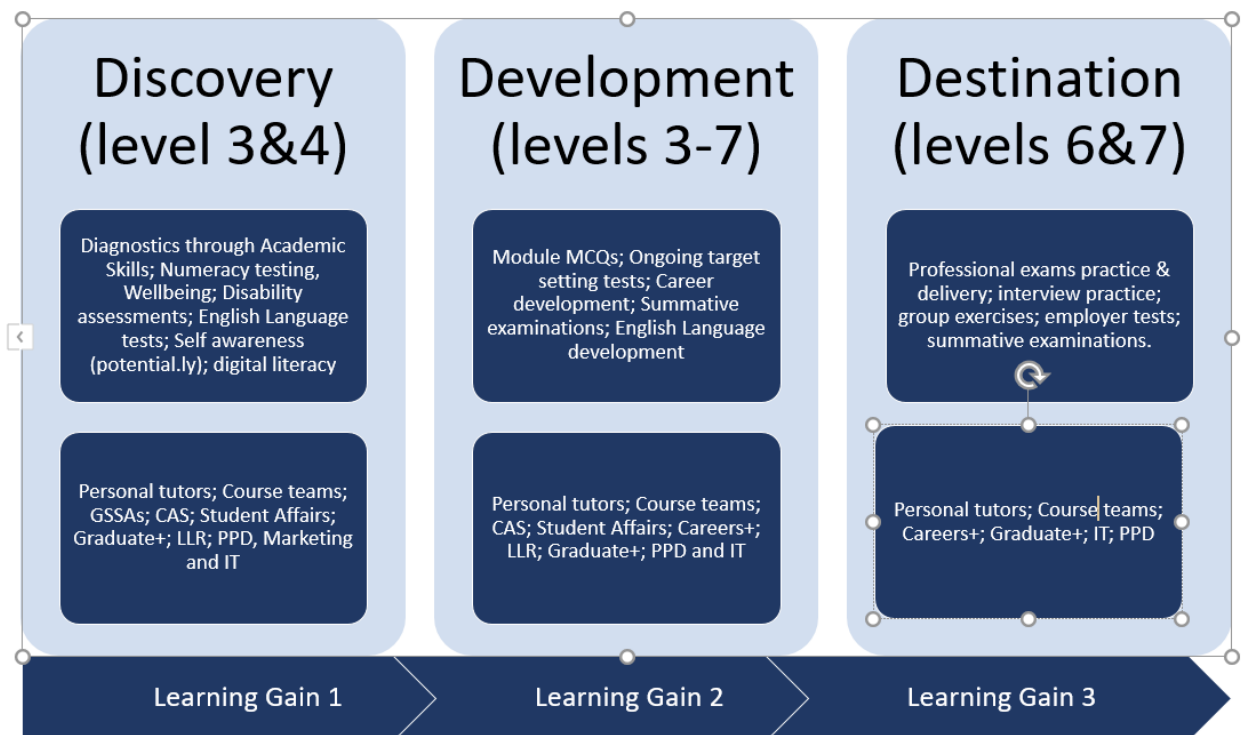


Figure 1: Student Digital Assessment Journey: Development Model

The model was underpinned by the desire for student learning gain to be recognised by the students and the institution as we sought to help students realise the benefits of a university education through formative and summative testing. The model was pivotal as it provided the clarity for the development team to stretch, test and break it when necessary.

As the development was something new to the sector, the groups were creating their own ideas and solutions as they progressed. The lead chaired both groups to ensure consistency of approach. This process took a real step forward when both groups were pulled together for a half day and were given the opportunity to question the Director of the Kennesaw State Testing Service. This brought a realism to the process, an insight into what a solution looked like and provided the opportunity for each member to assert the one area of concern or opportunity (pet idea) that they felt could hinder or help the project. From a project lead perspective, this approach was a risk as it saw a release of control, but the partner had been fully briefed about the university's vision and there was the potential for some real innovation to take place.

The outcome was seen as 'a game changer' as it provided real impetus and enabled all participants to make a step forward into the unknown, with the reassurance that it was possible, because they had seen it or heard about it. Confidence in the project grew and members became real advocates for the work. In its first year of operation in 2019-20, the Assessment Centre processed over 8000 formative and summative assessments and introduced a diagnostic testing service for all students transitioning into the university.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned that we saw ourselves as being fortunate to work within the third space. In fact, it is a privileged position to be in, as very few people in any university have the opportunity to engage with the entirety of an organization. Therefore, we have a responsibility to use this opportunity wisely to benefit the university, its students and staff and, because we recognize the value in our position, encourage those we engage with to also break out of any attraction they have to remaining within their silo. This is challenging, of course, as those of us who operate in the role are often seeking to improve institutional performance rather than the performance of one particular course, department or school. The third space role, then, takes on an added function of sometimes supporting colleagues to change their views about their own role in the institution.

For us, boundary spanning approaches have been successful in instilling confidence in collaborators, that their voice will be heard and that they can help lead that change. Creation of shared visions through hearing challenging voices and letting those discussions evolve results in the creation of new and real advocates within the development team. This results in empowered participants who engage and lead consultation, development and the embedding of final outcomes. Not only does this lead to better knowledge and expertise of wider issues within the institution for the individuals involved, it also facilitates the spreading of that knowledge as they return to work with their own teams and departments. This is key as once the directors of change have moved away, the innovations needs to live and thrive at the local level through the enthusiasm of those participants. Through this process we appreciate that many staff may start their own evolution away from the constraints of a bounded professional towards that of an unbounded adventurer or a blended professional.

References

Cormier, D. (2010) Community as Curriculum and Open Learning Learning. Dave's Educational Blog (online). Available at <http://davecormier.com/edblog/2010/06/17/community-as-curriculum-and-open-learning>

Curran, R., & Millard, L. (2015). A partnership approach to developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging: Opportunities for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 67-78.

Ernst, C. Chrobot-Mason, D. (2011) *Boundary Spanning Leadership – Six practices for solving problems, driving innovation and transforming organisations*. McGraw Hill, New York

Freeman, R., Millard, L., Brand, S., & Chapman, P. (2014). Student academic partners: Student employment for collaborative learning and teaching development.

Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 51(3), 233–243

Millard, L. (2020). Students as colleagues: The impact of working on campus on students and their attitudes towards the university experience. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 11(1), 37–49.

Millard, L and Evans, R. (2020) Student Partnerships in Retention and Success, Chapter 6 within Student Retention and Success in Higher Education, Palgrave Macmillan (to be published)

Millard, L. Taylor, L and Hogan, J (2020). Recognition and Retention: Enabling Dual Benefits from Microcredentials through Graduate+. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, (to be published)

Nygaard, C., Brand, S., Bartholomew, P., & Millard, L. (2013). Student engagement: Identity, motivation and community. Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

Whitchurch, C. (2013) *Reconstructing identities in higher education: The rise of third space professionals*. London, Routledge.

Whitchurch, C. (2008) Beyond administration and management: Reconstructing the identities of professional staff in UK higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 30:4 pp375-386.